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ABSTRACT

The location of a university writing center is not as important as whether the faculty responsible for the center have a clear picture of how they would like the center to be viewed by the students. A campus writing center should be the hub of all academic writing across the campus. For one instructor, the first lab he developed at a small college was like another English class for the students. Later, as a faculty supervisor of the writing center at a large community college in Florida, he felt that the biggest boon to making the writing at least as important as the remediation was the use of computers. At the present time, there is a need for the writing center at South Carolina State to serve the whole university community, so that students and faculty can come to talk about their writing at any stage of the writing process, not just to type a paper. In addition to computer literacy and writing workshops, the center offers mini workshops throughout the year. In the future, satellite writing centers across the campus will not focus on computer skills but will focus on conferencing about writing. (CR)

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The Center for Writing at South Carolina State University

By

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The Center for Writing at South Carolina State University

A paraphrase of a favorite African Proverb is that it does not matter what you call me; it is what I answer to that is important.. One source of the proverb is about how there is so much to carry from the farm to the market and no containers in which to transport the goods. So, the wise farmer will take a few palm wine leaves, put them together, and create a makeshift basket. So it is not what the thing is but what it does that makes is successful. Whether your center is known as a writing lab, a computer lab, whether it is a part of a resource center or a stand alone, whether it is in the English Department or not, the important thing is that you know what you want it to be known for and what you will answer to.

My idea of a campus writing center is that it is the center, hub if you will, of all academic writing across the campus. It is a place where clients write and talk about writing, a place where clients learn about writing: academic writing, writing for publication, writing successful proposals, and creative writing.

Writing centers are as different as the schools and colleges that house them.

In 1981, while chairing the English Department at a small church-related liberal arts college, I developed my first lab, which was like another English class for the students, I insisted that students be given the

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opportunity to write. By that time, it was a foregone conclusion that students could complete as many grammar exercises as were available, and still not transfer that knowledge to the writing. We gave a pretest (Test of Standard Written English) of writing skills, and based on an evaluation of that test, the student was assigned one of several teacher-made modules to complete before taking the posttest which always contained a writing portion. Faculty complained about more writing, but we compromised and the posttests were no longer than a paragraph of 8-10 sentences. Scores greatly improved, and we were very proud.

When I left this small college in South Carolina, I went to work at a large community college in central Florida. I was hired as a faculty supervisor of the writing center, which consisted of a classroom with three or four round tables, some books, and a paraprofessional who was an aspiring writer. As he showed me around, my division chair said to me, "squint your eyes and imagine the kind of place that you would like for this to become." I was delighted, and I began to read the journals and visit other similar schools in the state. At this time, everybody in the state of Florida was overwhelmed with CLAST (College Level Academic Skills Test); each student who wanted to attend and graduate from a four-year institution had to pass the Academic Skills Test before his/her third year. The writing portion of the test was crucial, so helping students prepare for the examination became an overriding concern in all my imaginations.

Most of the clients were from the pre college fundamentals of writing class for which the Writing center was a major support. Here again, we were in the business of remediation, but I was even more determined that actual writing would be a part of all we did in the center; consequently, every teacher-made module contained a post test that required at least a paragraph demonstrating the correct use of the semicolon or whatever skill the student had worked on in the Center.

But the biggest boon to making the writing at least as important as the remediation was computers. As the number of Apple II e's grew from the initial three to twenty, we knocked out a wall and took over the next classroom. The interest in word processing was overwhelming. Students were hired to tutor students and faculty in Bankstreet Writer and Apple Writer. Additionally, one of the English instructors taught a course in computer-assisted writing in the writing center. This was great because this class put some very knowledgeable computer users in the center with the novices, and they shared and learned from each other all the time.

The next time I had the opportunity to make a writing center what I wanted it to be came when I was hired at my present university, where the English Department had already experienced a writing lab which was a major support for the Competency-based English Composition classes. The students would attend class three times a week and work in the writing lab with commercially made modules two days a week. Sometime in the

late 70's, funding decreased and courses were no longer taught five days a week. Not long after the demise of the writing lab, the university revised the curriculum, and the English Department is no longer responsible for pre-college English.

So when I was hired in 1985, I saw a need for a writing center to serve the whole university community (students and faculty); I wanted to create a center for writing, and since remediation was not the province of the English Department, we did not have to make it a driving force in our center.

Fortunately or unfortunately, twenty Macintosh plus computers, some Imagewriter printers, and a scanner were the first inhabitants of the writing center. The English Department benefitted from a Title III activity that was responsible for developing computer support in academic programs that previously had none. Consequently, our task was to develop a writing center around the computers. This was a good and a bad thing.

Because of past experience with a writing lab and the advent of computer labs across the campus, tutors and clients often refer to the center as the computer lab. There are times when I call it the computer-assisted writing center and other times when it's the writing center because I want clients to see us as a writing center, not a computer lab. So my challenge was to keep the writing important in a room full of computers. I envisioned a student creating something on the computer

and going over it with a tutor or a student coming into the center discussing a writing assignment before creating the text of the paper. But what really happens is that the student comes in at 11 AM to type a paper that is due at 12:00 or 12:30. No time for talking about the paper.

Nevertheless, we are still working on getting the students and faculty to see us as a place where they can come to talk about their writing at any stage of the writing process; however, they do come to create papers, resumes, letters of application, etc. So, we decided to tackle the problem with software appropriate to the needs of our students and that would do what most students don't have time to do with a tutor, integrating correct writing with computer literacy.

Trying to keep writing as the focus in a center full of computers is similar to the state described by Peter Elbow in the February 1995 Journal of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. In an article titled "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict of Goals," Elbow discusses the conflict between being a writer and being an academician and leading students in either direction. While he wants students to say "I feel like I am a writer: I get deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing -- figuring out what I think and feel through putting down words; I naturally turn to writing when I am perplexed -- even when I am sad or happy . . .writing is an important part of my life." Elbow would also see that it is reasonable that his students would say, "I feel like I am an

academic: reading knowledgeable books, wrestling my way through important issues with fellows, figuring out hard questions." So he says, "in short, I want my students to feel themselves as writers and feel themselves as academics" (72,73). And I want my students or clients in the Writing Center to feel that they are proficient in using the computer and I want them to feel that they can produce writing that is of excellent quality.

When we were using Word 4.0, we put the desktop accessory, Macproof, on the hard drive. MacProof is an editing and proofreading desk accessory for the Macintosh by Lexpertise, Inc.. It checks your writing for potential problems in mechanics, usage, and style. It also allows you to view the structure of your writing by listing sentences; highlighting sentence beginnings, paragraph beginnings and endings, etc.; and counting words. This would be great, if the students used the program.

At one point, I required that my students in all my classes macproof their papers and give me copies of sentence lists, sentence beginnings, endings, etc. The volume of paper was awesome. Eventually, I required that they save these lists on their diskette that I took up with the paper. Many teachers send students to review the rules of good writing with a program named Practical Composition and published by Queue; the five programs in this series include "Logical, Clear Sentences," "Selecting the Best Approach," and "Making Sentences Work."

Another program that students use when recommended by their instructors is Writer's Helper by Conduit. This program helps students with the writing process from the prewriting stage: finding an idea, exploring a topic, and organizing information for a paper, to drafting; and revising: structure, audience, and grammar checks.

For word processing , we presently use Microsoft Word 6.0 with the grammar checker which students use much more often than they used MacProof. Knowing that some students do need and want help with problems of grammar and usage, we have purchased software that aids the editing and revising stage. One such program allows students to proofread and correct grammar errors in almost 487 articles, which include stories as well as business and personal letters; the program is Perfect Copy by Logicus, Inc. Another writing center resource is Practical Grammar III by Queue, a series of seven programs including "Patterns of Sentences," "Verb Voice, Tense, and Mood," and "Case and Gender of Nouns and Pronouns." Students like the programs, and faculty report that they see a significant improvement in students' writing after they have completed the set of disks.

In order to be the center for writing on the campus, we had to give support to the faculty and staff in their writing endeavors. And so we proposed a Writing Workshop for faculty and staff to be held for three weeks during the summer.

Both faculty and staff welcomed the opportunity to talk about writing, to learn from others, to share, etc. because the truth is that faculty at my university labor under a true dichotomy; during a time of unlimited enrollment, the faculty evaluation and the requirements for tenure and promotion are at an all time high in terms of demands of time and effort outside the realm of the classroom, especially the call for greater research and publication efforts.

So, we organized workshops on "Writing with Computers," "Writing for Publication," "Writing Successful Proposals," and "Creative Writing." The "Writing with Computers" workshops are held in the computer-assisted writing center with various invited authorities on writing with computers sharing their ideas and techniques with the participants who come from across the campus. Our own Dr. Pamela Farrell Childers was the consultant for our first workshop when each participant wrote a writing with computers activity into his/her syllabus

Every two years, we offer a writing workshop for faculty and staff. These workshops usually include concurrent sessions on Writing for Professional Journals, Publishing your creative writing, Proposal Writing and Automated Proposal Development. In addition to hearing from co-workers and other guests who have proven track records in at least one of the workshop areas, participants from across the campus are also introduced to research with the on-line system in the library, word

processing and other programs like Writer's Helper, and local publishers. The first time we offered the workshop, we offered a financial incentive to those who received a letter of acceptance and sent a copy to the Writing Center by a specified date.

In addition to computer literacy and writing workshops, the center offers mini workshops throughout the year. These include documentation styles, report writing, creative writing which often includes a poetry reading, and resume writing; we even give resume paper to students attending the workshops.

As the Center for writing on our campus, the writing center also has an obligation to give support to other clients in the university community. In most instances, if a funded project includes students from elementary to high school, they inevitably spend some time in center doing word processing or desktop publishing activities. This past summer, I worked with a group of 45 students between the ages of 10 and 13. They created several creative writing activities on the computers, and published their work in a booklet which included work from each participant.

So, all in all, because we have the luxury of knowing that students can get serious remediation in more than one place on campus, we make correct writing our focus with students in the writing center, faculty and staff in workshops, and other clients of the center.

In the future, we plan to further the focus on writing by developing

satellite writing centers across the campus that will not contain computers. The focus there will be conferencing about writing and not developing computer skills. Also, the near future will bring tutoring on line and research on the world wide web. What can happen when teachers and students have access to the internet is mind boggling.

Although the conflict between computer literacy and focusing on the writing process is not completely resolved, we are encouraged and will continue to make the writing center at South Carolina State University the Center for Writing on our campus.

Ghussan R. Greene, Ph.D.